



OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



THE SPUR OF COURAGE

By JANE ANDERSON

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JULIO MARTINEZ, his deputy-sheriff badge a bright silver star in the big mirror of the Nugget Saloon, waited with his right hand conveniently near his six-shooter. The sheriff stood at the other end of the bar, watching.

Waiting for his drink, Julio warily ran his eye over the crowd surging about him. Dirty negroes from the irrigation ditches predominated; but here and there Julio spotted a well-known *choila*, or horse-thief. It was Saturday night, and the sheriff had prophesied trouble. Julio had been waiting half an hour, and every minute the cursing had grown louder, the stench of cheap liquor stronger. Saturday night was always bad; but, with the Nugget crowded to the doors, and the new negro element to deal with, to-night had fair to break the record. Julio's dark eyes—the one feature betraying the Spanish in his blood—were slightly dilated with excitement. For Julio knew little of fighting. He had been appointed deputy sheriff six months before, but his arrests had been quiet ones.

At the crucial moment when panic and gun-smoke made a setting for some death-ridden brawl, it was the sheriff who fought for control. The sheriff's smoke-grimed face, surmounted by that unmistakable mane of sandy hair, could always be located at the cursing, writhing center of any riot. It was the sheriff who knew the trick of dealing a blow with the butt of his gun—a blow that would slit a clean gash in a man's scalp, and would rob him of consciousness until he was killed—sometimes longer. Because of this the sheriff had won great favor; but his deputy was said to be a coward. Julio knew the things said of him. Instead of infuriating him, they cut him to the heart. He did not believe that he was yellow, for he had never run. But to see men fighting and snarling like dogs paralyzed him; and the sight or smell of fresh blood overcame him with a terrible nausea. To-night would tell; the sheriff had ordered him to Saturday-night duty in the Nugget. Julio prayed for trouble. The six-shooter at his hip had been given him by Marie, the sheriff's daughter; he wanted her to know, too. Julio glanced down the bar and saw the sheriff drinking another straight whiskey; it must have been somewhere near the tenth since supper. It flashed through Julio's mind that his astounding capacity for drink might have something to do with the sheriff's impervious courage; but he put the unclean thought from him.

As Julio raised his small glass of red wine, an accompanying quiver of ruby light raced up the big mirror before him; and as he lowered the wineglass to the bar he quizzically followed the flash of a descending ripple.

Above the laughing an oath leaped out—the oath that does not go unchallenged. In the maddened uproar Julio did not hear the shot; but in the great mirror thousands of wriggling lights radiated from a round, black hole a foot above him. One twisting crack darted like a lightning flash to the ceiling. The second bullet sang above his head, and a mist of singed hair sifted over his face. The shattering mirror swayed toward him; there was a din of crashing glass—the cursing and screaming of men. The stampede dragged Julio from the bar and flung him to the floor. A man trampling over him was plowed down and fell, a stream of blood gushing from his leg. Julio flayed his way toward the door, crawling like some animal between the trampling legs of the stampede. He found himself on the sidewalk, flung against the front wall of the saloon. He rose to his feet dizzily. Again he had been found wanting. He reeled through the splintered doorway. He stumbled over a body that yielded sickeningly beneath his feet. A sputtering lamp in a distant corner of the saloon flickered into a feeble flame and showed two men beneath it, grappling. Running toward them, Julio saw the light glint on a six-shooter butt as it flashed up, then sank down crookedly to the shorter man's shoulder. The man dropped with a quiet thud. Julio did not have to see the mane of sandy hair that bent above the fallen body; he knew that twisted blow.

The sheriff clutched the unconscious man by the shoulder. With the other hand he was playing the circle of his flash. A huddled mass lay against the wall, a broken chair tossed upon it.

"That's one of 'em. Get him," the sheriff commanded. Vividly conscious of the unmistakable stickiness of the shirt, he dragged the man toward the sheriff.

"There's more," the sheriff grunted. "Shots come from three different places."

"By the door," Julio gulped. "I walked on him."

"I'll take him, too," the sheriff answered.

"He's dead," Julio answered.

"I'll get him to the sidewalk and the doc-man can say that."

They struggled toward the doorway with their ghastly luggage. The sheriff added the second body to his cargo, and without the guidance of the flash-light they stumbled down the remaining glass-strewn steps to the street. A crowd, stretched in a big horse-shoe before the door, burst into an echoing shout as the officers laid their spoil upon the sidewalk. With a flush mounting to his forehead the sheriff swept off his Stetson in awkward recognition. Julio seized the excuse to bend down and manacle one of the prisoners who was moaning faintly.

A doctor stepped forward. The Mexican who had fallen near the door had been shot through the heart. Julio and the doctor rolled the body to the wall and covered it with the bartender's proffered bib-apron. The negro and the Irish miner would live. The sheriff forced a way through the crowd and loaded the prisoners into the first vehicle he found. Julio took the reins and the sheriff with the doctor mounted guard in the wagon-bed.

"I don't know what the row started up about," the sheriff said, "but they was firin' from three different spots in the saloon. The only worse fight I ever see

was when I clubbed four niggers who was firin' from all four corners of a joint."

The doctor glanced up admiringly, and the sheriff launched into a description of the four-handed quarrel. As the wagon pulled up before the jail a ranger dashed in on a lathered pony.

"Murderer from Fresno got in here on a freight last night," he panted. "He's trying to get to Mexico. I've got to put these posters up all over the Territory. He killed a woman and her brother. The State of California offers five thousand dollars reward." He unrolled one of the posters and threw it to the sheriff. "Like to see you get him, Bob."

The sheriff read the poster by his flash. "If he's tryin' to get to Mexico he's 'bout down at the Tules by now. He'll probably camp there to-night. The Tule Laguna is fourteen miles, crow-flyin'. Yes, he 'bout hit for that."

When the crowd had thinned, Julio said suddenly: "Bob, you stay here and keep an eye on the town to-night. I'm going down to the Tules. If I get the man we split the money."

The sheriff gave him a keen look. "I didn't appoint you to fight. I needed somebody who could *sabe* Spanish; that's how you come to be deputy."

Julio winced. "It's time I made good."

"Well, you can come with me to the Laguna. I was goin' to take somebody else. Be here in two hours."

Julio turned on his heel. The sheriff called him back.

"I see the young 'un ride around the corner just then. You'd better ride out home with her."

Julio ran back to the corral for his pony. He caught up with Marie at the foot of the sloping hill that swept up to the orchards. She had dropped her reins over the saddle horn, and her pony trudged along, munching some greenery he had snatched from a low-hanging branch. Swaying lightly to the rhythmic movement of the pony's even stride, the girl rode lax in her saddle. Julio caught his breath with ecstasy at the proud grace of her bearing, the supple beauty of the long, free lines of her body. She drew her pony to the side so that the approaching rider might pass her. Julio rode close to her and caught the reins, drawing the horses back into the road. Marie looked up at him, startled. He was bending over her, his face so near her own that she could feel his quick breath against her cheek. She drew back and gathered up the reins swiftly.

"No," he said sharply—"no." He caught her hands. "We will not race to-night. You must listen to me. I've tried to tell you for two years, but you've always run from me."

"I have not run away from you," she said, with startled coquetry.

He did not hear her. "Marie," he said—and there was something in the way he said her name that sent the blood dizzily to her head—"Marie, you care—you care—I know that you care more for me than you know." He forced her to meet his eyes, and she stared at him, fascinated. Her pouting red lips were parted and her breath came quickly, brokenly. "And you've got to tell me—to-night. You cannot lie to me again—you've lied to me long enough."

The cool, moist sweetness of the orange-flowers was about them. To Julio the tumult of the world seemed very distant and unmeaning. The life at Yuma, all the long years of his existence, seemed suddenly but some fantastic caprice of his imagination, some trivial dream. The girl snatched her hands from his grasp, and, drawing the two horses to a standstill, slipped down from her saddle. As she stood looking up at Julio she was smiling slightly, her head thrown back and the moonlight like silver on her face and white, rounded throat.

Julio flung himself to the ground beside her. "You're cruel—cruel," he whispered—"you love to hurt me." But when she would have answered him he silenced her. His face was pale and his eyes burned like pools of flame. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Say it—say it, Marie," he pleaded.

"Say what?" she whispered, with a pitiful attempt at raillery.

"Say you—you love me!" he commanded brokenly. Her eyes fell.

"I don't care if you love me—if you hate me," he cried—"I don't care." He seized her in his arms and pressed her against him. For one glorious second he knew that he was god of the world; then he put her away quickly. "I'm a fool—a fool!" he muttered. "I wouldn't have you—like that. I wouldn't force you to kiss me."

She buried her face in her hands.

"Don't cry, dear," he whispered, humbly. "I—I'm sorry—but the thought of the Tules—of leaving you—" She put out a groping hand. He took it wonderingly.

"It may mean death down there to-night," he said, steadily. "And I had to know before—that's all."

She raised a frightened, tear-stained face. "Death?" she whispered.

He laughed unsteadily. "No, I don't want to buy you with pity, either. Whether it means death or nothing does not count in this."

She crept to him, her frightened eyes searching his face. "You cannot go," she commanded.

"Why not?"

"Because," she whispered, "I—I—" She stopped and stood looking up at him. The proud defiance had faded from her face, and there was a wistfulness in the wavering smile that trembled about her mouth—a wistfulness that made him feel strangely helpless.

"I can't bear it, dear," she said, and, unasked, put her hands up on either side of his face and drew him down to her.

"Are you sure—sure you love me?" he asked. "I am sure," she answered, softly. "I want you to kiss me."

And he took her in his arms and kissed her mouth and tear-wet face.

"But you must let me go to the Tules," he said. "I want to be worth you."

"I'm not worried about that," she answered, quaintly,

"But I want to show the world. They say I'm a coward."

She hung her head and did not answer him.

"If I were, would you marry me?" he demanded. "But this is not fair to you. I might as well ask you if you would marry a man lame or halt or blind."

"If you were—were what they say, I would marry you," she replied, steadily. "I could not help it."

"I will be worth it," Julio said, slowly.

"I don't think the world's opinion matters so much as that," she argued. "I'd rather have you alive and a coward than have you killed on some man-hunt."

"You'll have to let me go, Marie. There's another reason, too. Do you remember, years and years ago, when we were kids at school in San Francisco, and I got in a fight?"

Marie nodded.

"Well, I got licked because I was scared—and I've never forgotten the way you looked at me."

"Then," she said, suddenly, "you must go. You must go right back to town. Don't keep dad waiting."

"I'll ride out home with you."

"No, I'll go alone. I want to tell mother, anyway—tell her by myself."

"Are you glad, dearest?" he demanded, boyishly.

She put her arms around his neck. "It was always you, Julio, even in the kid days when they sent us to school in 'Frisco," she whispered. But when he would have kissed her good-by and lifted her into her saddle, she clung to him, trembling. "I'm afraid—afraid you won't come back to me."

"Who's a coward now?" he reproached her.

She looked up at him, her face blanched, her eyes

When they rode out past the orchards the sudden fragrance of the blossoms gave Julio the courage to ask the sheriff the question that had been struggling for utterance. "Can—I can I have Marie?"

The sheriff swung about in his saddle. "I don't know about that," he said, lamely.

He urged his pony into a run, and Julio followed in silence. The orchards gave place, without warning, to a glaring mesa of white sand and mesquite. They rode on through the desert night in a silence punctuated by an occasional curse as one of the ponies would stumble into a gopher-hole or the sheriff would have some difficulty with the whisky canteen.

From the distance of a mile the Tule Laguna can be seen, an irregular flat in a basin of the table-land. Surrounded by a chain of low dunes, at the foot of which is an almost impenetrable growth of abnormal mesquite and towering cacti, the lagoon bubbles and gurgles in an eternal shade. Fed from some unknown source, the dank, green pool, with its quicksand marshes, covers an area of two good miles. Lutting no more than an inch above the moss-incrusted water, or rising the height of a man from some concealed island, the giant tules clog the stagnant lake—enormous sword-edged bulrushes, taper-pointed but flat, and the width of a woman's wrist. At night the slimy moss gleams in patches of interlocking silver, and the snakes that swim close to the surface leave a glimmering trail of leveled phosphorescence. Hanging close to the water is a drifting blanket of noxious mist, opaque in the moonlight; and the lake seeps with lean, coarse-furred rats and small, unseen animals that leap to and fro in the water with a soft, surging thud.

The sheriff and Julio stalked the ponies a half-mile from the lagoon. The sheriff shouldered his rifle and the canon. "You must take your rifle," he said, whispering, for the stench of the lagoon was in their nostrils, and the cold fear of that infamous lake was upon them. "Ain't but two of us now. If we sight him, one of us can pick him off at rifle range. We'll circle around on the outside of these here sand hills and try and locate him. We've got the worst to go now—cross this level stretch and under this moon this is light as day."

"If we can see to the dunes we'll have some sort of barometer," Julio murmured.

Sometimes, rising to the twisted, interweaving shadows of the deserted mesquite, then would run for ten or fifteen strokes then they would drop down upon the ground and quiver along, full length, propelled by jets and legs like some fantastic, gigantic spiders. Once Julio eyed ahead, but the sheriff called hoarsely to him to wait. When the sheriff overtook him the smell of whisky was strong, and Julio could see a tangled network of any veins etched across the other's eyes.

They were within ten feet of the barriade. "Guess

Julio braced his six-shooter on the crest of the hill and fired, then scrambled ten feet along the brow. The ruse worked. Two quick spurts of sand marked the spot where he had lain. Julio emptied his revolver toward the echoing report. He was answered by a silence broken only by the sleepy bubbling of the lagoon. He reloaded. Waiting, he was conscious of crooked lines of sweat trickling down his face. Clinging with his left hand to the crest of the hill, he dragged himself up. The unstable sand gave way beneath his clutch, and he plunged over the dune, down into the treacherous lagoon, rolling over and over like a monstrous tumblebug. Even falling, he instinctively managed to keep his revolver away from his body, and when he crashed into a cactus it was his extended right arm that brought him up sharply. The sudden impact sent the gun spinning. Julio waded through the marsh for it, rescuing it from a bed of tules, where it had stuck in the dense growth. As he drew back a shot clipped off a handful of the speared points and tossed them upon the thick water, where they righted themselves and lay motionless.

Julio looked about him. He was trapped in the basin of the sand-hills. The tules, swaying, would betray his every movement. He was sick from the nauseating stench that hung in a wavering mist upon the stagnant water. It would simply be a matter of minutes until they got him, and he would lie in that iridescent scum that undulated even now in the sickening waves his fancy created.

Above a hill, facing him, he saw a thin trail of smoke. He shook with a sudden madness. He would die—but not like a trapped animal. He looked speculatively at the devious underbrush skirting the lagoon. The moving bushes would betray him as he crawled. He holstered his gun, and knelt down in the water, feeling his way along the slimy, yielding bed.

His entire body and the lower part of his face covered with the thick liquid, he moved his way into the lagoon, guided by his groping hands and prodded by his feet. Snakes fled, terrified before him—great, round-bodied green snakes, that swam sluggishly, leaving a widening trail of purpling water; worm-like, bright-eyed reptiles, squirming, like live coils of gold wire, through a shimmering, flame-lit path of opalescent phosphorus.

The lean rats swarmed about him, one brazenly clinging with sharp claws to his clothing. Once, struggling through an almost impenetrable bed of tules, he felt something tugging at his hand, something clinging and warm and soft. He snatched his hand back with a startled cry. By the faint moonlight he could see the thick drops of quicksand already drying on his hand and forearm. He made a wide detour. Once he sank down and down, with the strange ease and lightness of a blown feather. The water was cooler. He rose to the surface suddenly, amid thousands of little spraying bubbles. Groping, his hands again touched the shelving bed, and he dragged himself forward, weak and trembling, but mysteriously refreshed.

He touched shore directly beneath the thin line of smoke. Keeping his body well under water, he looked back. On a nearby hill a man mounted on a black horse searched the tules, a rifle at his shoulder. Julio would have sold his soul for his deserted rifle, strapped on that distant saddle; from his vantage he could have picked off the secure rider so easily.

The moon disappeared for an instant behind a great yellow cloud, and Julio sprang from his hiding place and ran for the smoke marked hill. An unexpected gulch, foot-tracked, cut around the side. Julio dared up the trail, chuckling to himself. He knew that he was going to his death in that waiting camp, but he would die fighting. They had thought to shoot him down like a dog and leave him to rot in the tules, but he had come up to face them, single-handed. He came suddenly upon the smouldering camp-fire just as a rider, dashing into camp, flung himself, cursing from his black horse. The rifle lay upon the ground where he had flung it first.

The eyes of the two men met. Julio reached for his gun, but the other was upon him. Locked in a death grip, they lunged about the camp, crushing into the litter of wood and rations that scattered before them. Julio exulted insanely in the feel of the writhing body that fought him. A great lust descended upon him—but to kill, to close his eager fingers like a living vise upon this neck from which filthy curses bubbled in a villainous, unmeaning stream. Some distant part of his brain speculated upon the triviality of killing with man-made weapons when one could know the glory of clubbing, of throttling with the naked hand. Once he laughed aloud—joyously.

Suddenly Julio knew that he was weakening. His body no longer responded to impressions; he was numb; his nerves were blunted. Some subtle communication between his body and brain was severed. His brain realized the diabolical plan of the other man—the plan to circle his victim nearer the red fire. But his body refused to receive the telegraphed signal. Once he saw tethered horses plunging and rearing at their stakes, and he knew that they were screaming, but he could no longer hear.

He could feel the stinging heat of the flames, and the smoke burned in his nostrils. He thought hazily of Marie and the cloying sweetness of orange-flowers. Suddenly he remembered the other man—the man on the pinto pony. He would come and find him—beaten. He gave a terrible wrench, breaking the grip upon his arms. He watched his hands flash up to the waiting throat; he saw the terror in the bulging eyes before him. He saw his fingers close upon the knotted neck. He watched the light go out of the purpling face, but there was no joy or thrill maddening through him. When the limp body sank before him he knew that he was solving. Without looking, he let it fall to the sand. He stood beside it, waiting. The seconds dragged by. Julio did not move. From the tules he heard the liquid thud of a diving rat. The world about him began to take on a greenish, hazy look, as if a sudden mist were drifting down upon it. Julio put his hand to his forehead weakly. To the touch of his palm his forehead seemed alien, distant. He looked at his hand. It was covered with drying blood where the tules had pierced it. He looked down at himself, at his sodden, slimy clothes covered with stiff, dark blots. He remembered, hazily, the clawing rats and the knife edges of the tules. He brought himself up sharply. He must be ready for the man who would come on the pinto pony. But his mind strayed. He looked at the disordered camp, at the line of tethered horses. He started forward. The pinto he had been waiting for stood second in line, saddled and bridled. The other horses, ten of them, were saddleless and rope-haltered. Julio stared, trying dizzily to think. He turned and for the first time looked at the bundle by the fire. Julio smiled weakly, admiringly. The thief had created an army out of one man; it was simple, riding through the noiseless sand and dashing back for a fresh horse before plunging madly to fire from another height. He had ruined two horses; they stood now, flecked with foam and blood-marked by spurs; but his brain, by conceiving the plan, commanded a tribute.

Julio unsaddled the black, and cinched up one of the fresh horses. It carried the flankband of a near-by ranch. "Horse thief, too," Julio murmured. He went back to the fire and turned over the body. It looked part Indian, with a narrow torso and long limbs. Julio dragged it across the sand toward the saddled pony. The man moaned faintly.

Julio found some canteen water and poured it on the blotched face. The man opened his eyes slowly. "I'm glad I didn't kill you," Julio said. "You belong to the law." The man stared back, unseeing. Julio bound the unresisting wrists with the prisoner's torn blanket, then he hoisted the inert bundle and slung it before the saddle, tying it to the horn.

It was at the orchards that Julio met the sheriff returning with his men. Over in the east a saffron mist foretold the coming dawn. Julio staggered from his saddle. The sheriff was talking to him, but he could not hear.

"Can—I can I have her?" he gulped, and reeled, drunkenly.

(Universal Syndicate)



Julio reached for his gun, but the other was upon him.

startlingly wide. "If you don't come back—oh, my God!" she sobbed.

She seemed suddenly to have stepped out of her girlhood, to have become a woman. Julio sensed that by some mysterious law of nature, he had wrought this miracle, and, looking down upon her unlifted face, he suffered the keenest pain of his life; but he was gloriously happy. He did not know if the tears in his eyes were from the quick pain that wrunged his heart or from the overwhelming wonder of his happiness.

"No, no!" she said, suddenly. "I want you to go."

She proffered her trembling lips for his kiss. He took her in his arms, comforting her as if she were a frightened child. Then he lifted her into the saddle. He watched her ride away, and waited until she turned and waved to him. The handkerchief fluttered very bravely, but he knew that she was crying.

He rode back to town at a furious run. He found the sheriff in his office filling a canteen with whisky. "It's a good thing to have along," he explained to Julio.

Julio took down a rifle and saddle-holster from the wall. He filled his cartridge belt, then he put his six-shooter into another holster—one that was not only secured at his belt but was fastened by a fourteen-inch strap to the top of his boot. An unsteady holster may mean that the gun will be caught for a second; and a second gives time for the other man to fire.

"Ready?" asked the sheriff, starting out to the corral. "Ready," Julio answered.

But when Julio started to lead his pony from the stable the sheriff stopped him, asking:

"You ain't got to ride 'Pache'?"

Julio looked up, astonished.

"Don't ride your own nag to-night. You don't want to lose him."

A picture of Apache cut down by a bullet and floundering in agony sent a chill through Julio's heart. He led the pony back to the corral and stole the time to unsaddle him. "Good-by, 'Pache,'" he said, turning away, and the horse whinnied and nuzzled a moist nose into Julio's hand.

he must be hid on the other side of the tules," the sheriff muttered.

As he ended, a bullet whistled over one of the low dunes and kicked up a puff of dust twenty yards away.

"He's here, anyhow," Julio said grimly.

"He's hid in those here hills somewhere—he don't dare show himself long enough to get a good range."

"We'll crawl to the top of this and get the drop on him," Julio directed sharply.

They made their way up through the yielding sand, sinking, shivering, almost everwhelmed by the cloud of dust swirling around them.

A quick report sounded. Julio swung about in time to see a man, mounted on a pinto pony, disappear around the nearest sand-hill. Julio's bullet, a second too late, buried itself noiselessly in the ground where the horse had stood.

The sheriff was standing unsteadily in the shifting sand, slick drops of blood pooling in the palm of his right hand, which he held cupped under his left wrist. The canteen lay at his feet, about it a widening circle of liquor. Almost in the center of the canteen was a frayed hole the size of a shirt button. The sheriff turned the canteen with his foot. The other side was almost torn away.

"A soft-muzzed bullet," the sheriff said, weakly. Julio ripped open the bloody sleeve and knotted his handkerchief above the broken wrist. The flesh of the arm swelled purple, but the stream of blood slowed to a sluggish trickle.

The sheriff's face was ashen. "We might as well turn tail," he said, hoarsely. He was staring down at the canteen. "Nobody won't ever know."

Julio burst into an insane laugh. "There won't be any cheering," he agreed.

"I'll go back and get more men," the sheriff suggested.

"Go back!" Julio cried. "I'll stick—there ain't any army here!"

He plunged on up the hill, and after a second's hesitation the sheriff slid down to the foot of the dune and crawled to the protection of the nearest mesquite.